

## CATHERINE'S HIDDEN LIFE

sort, a black flood across the ages, severing the Italy that had been Dante's from the Italy that was to be Catherine's.

Petrarca, as we know from the famous note on the margin of his Virgil, was at Parma when the news of Laura's death reached him; his *Trionfo della Morte* idealizes this fearful time into an impassioned homily on the transitoriness of all earthly greatness. Boccaccio was apparently at Naples, where, in the following year, he began his *Decameron* with the rhetorical description of the pestilence at Florence, the details of which he had not personally witnessed. The passed horrors had no permanent effect for good on men's minds, and those who believed that a great renovation of the world would ensue were speedily disillusioned. Restraint and convention had been cast off; riot and excess of every kind blazed among the survivors. The deserted streets rang with the shouts of revellers or echoed to the fierce cries of brawlers, -lust, pride, and avarice tightened their grasp on men's souls. "Without any restraint," writes Matteo Villani, "almost all our city plunged into evil living, and the same and worse did the other cities of the world. And, according to the tidings that we could hear, there was no part in which those who had escaped from the divine anger lived in continence, but as though they deemed the hand of God was weary." Scarcity and famine followed in many places; work kept for long at a standstill; everywhere dissensions and quarrels arose over questions of heritage and succession. Not even the characteristic gaiety of the Sienese could hide the appalling desolation of their city: *per Siena non pareva che fusse personal* "the cynical and shameless stories of the *Decameron* paint the corruption of the following years with the master's hand. Exaggeration, doubtless, there is, and the writer's hatred of the priests and their allies has coloured his pen; but the reader of certain terrible chapters of Catherine's *Dialogue*, written not quite thirty years later, will find only too striking confirmation of Boccaccio's testimony.

*La Dmocrasia Fiorentina nel suo tramonto*, pp. 29-39.  
These figures do not include the contado.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. M. Villani, i. 4, 5; *Cronica Senese*, coll. 124, 125.